

A Changing Security Landscape: **NATO and Russia in the Arctic**

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ABSTRACT

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the conclusion of the Cold War, the Arctic served as a region free from geopolitical challenges and military tensions. This allowed the Arctic states – Canada, Denmark, Norway, the United States, and Russia – to focus on diplomatic cooperation and nonmilitary security challenges. Since the 1980s however, transformative physical-environmental changes across the Arctic threaten to destabilize regional relationships and heighten the possibility of a serious crisis or conflict. These changes are altering the region's longstanding geopolitical and economic character, as new development and investment opportunities open up in areas without clearly defined international rules and norms. In response to these developments, Russia seeks to take advantage of the relative deficiency of international law to carve out a hegemonic position in the Arctic, leaning on its military presence and unrivaled ice-breaker fleet to pursue its interests. This article will explore what role the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can play in the Arctic to ensure stability, and whether it can establish international rules and norms in the face of growing Russian militarization.

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altering the region's longstanding geopolitical and economic character, as new development and investment opportunities open up in areas without clearly defined international rules and norms. In response to these developments, Russia seeks to take advantage of the relative deficiency of international law to carve out a hegemonic position in the Arctic, leaning on its military presence and unrivaled ice-breaker fleet to pursue its interests. This article will explore what role the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can play in the Arctic to ensure stability, and whether it can establish international rules and norms in the face of growing Russian militarization.

THE CASE FOR NATO

Currently, the Arctic lacks a single comprehensive governance regime focused on regional security issues, making the management of the region's rapid transformation a major challenge for the Arctic states. While the Arctic Council has "promoted cooperative governance in the region,"¹ its flexible structure and legally non-binding norms are insufficient to ameliorate the governance gap in the long-term. The United States presently lacks crucial capabilities and regional leverage to keep pace with the rate of transformation to provide regional stability. Compounding the issue, "the rest of the Arctic states...cannot by themselves balance competing great powers in the region."² To ensure that the Arctic remains a domain built on cooperation and diplomacy, the West needs to commit to a coherent security strategy to address growing competition and uncertainty. Otherwise, they risk having insufficient means to regulate interstate relations or deconflict geopolitical tensions.

NATO has a significant interest in preserving and enhancing the Arctic's rules-based order, which includes open access to global sea lines of communication, protecting transatlantic communications cable networks, and preventing Russia from exercising unilateral military control of the region. In the pursuit of these interests, NATO is the ideal candidate to promote regional stability and norm-setting due to its foundational principles, strategic mission, multilateral authority, and defensive and deterrence capabilities. NATO was founded in part as a norm-building institution, to promote European security and stability through the development and formalization of political relationships between states both inside and outside of the alliance.³ By including the Arctic in NATO's purview the alliance can use its norm-building role to impress rule of law and promote the peaceful settlement of disputes. Moreover, the current NATO strategy incorporates a 360-degree approach that seeks to "acknowledge and address threats and challenges from diverse actors and from all directions."⁴ It is through this approach that NATO expanded its purview to include Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. As Russia continues its military modernization efforts in the Arctic, concerns over

instability and geopolitical competition grow. A strategic reorientation toward the polar region would serve as a legitimate progression for NATO, given five of the eight internationally recognized Arctic states are members of NATO. To be certain, NATO could wield immense multilateral authority in a region which is strategically important to Euro-Atlantic security.⁵ Ultimately, NATO's defense and deterrence capabilities provide the most compelling justification for it to counter Russia's expansive militarization efforts in the Arctic, enabling it to strengthen the region's rules-based order. For NATO, "Russian militarization risks transforming Arctic relations, and [the alliance] will not want to be left unprepared."⁶ In this case, diplomacy may prove ineffective and legal ambiguity could incentivize Russian revisionism.

BACKGROUND

The Arctic's physical transformation over the last forty years has created new opportunities for development and investment, and greater access to Arctic shipping routes such as the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route. Indeed, the Arctic has experienced a period of warming and declining sea ice coverage, with "climate change expected to lead to a nearly ice-free Arctic Ocean in late summer and increased navigability of Arctic marine waters by the middle of this century."⁷ At present, approximately three-quarters of summer sea ice has been lost.⁸ These changes bring new commercial opportunities, such as new fishing stocks, access to untapped resources, and shorter commercial travel times between Europe and Asia.⁹ In fact, the Arctic is estimated to contain 25% of the world's oil and gas reserves, some 90 billion barrels of oil and 1,700 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.¹⁰ These opportunities have piqued many non-Arctic states' interests. China looks to capitalize on them with renewed regional investment and increased diplomatic presence.

Most concerns regarding an 'Arctic Scramble' are misleading, as "many of the [untapped] resources lie uncontested, well within the lands and waters of the Arctic states"¹¹ exclusive economic zones. These exclusive economic zones, governed by both the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Arctic Council,¹² are essential to the diplomatic management of territorial claims in the Arctic. However, overlapping territorial claims and ambiguous legal authorities pose significant challenges to continued cooperative governance in the region. The most widely known example of this regional challenge are the ongoing territorial boundary disputes between Russia, Denmark, and Canada over the Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater continental ridge dividing the Arctic into two oceanic basins. Yet even this is being resolved diplomatically, as most disputes over Arctic maritime boundaries have been resolved peacefully.¹³ However, within this realm of established international law, where disputes are settled through negotiation, lie legal ambiguities which

could be exploited by Russia.

Specifically, the ambiguous legal status of Svalbard is one of the most concerning issues for NATO in the Arctic. Svalbard, a collection of Norwegian islands located approximately 500 nautical miles off the northern coast of Norway, is governed by a legal framework that generates significant ambiguity and uncertainty as to which states have the legal authority to control activities on the island.¹⁴ In 1920, the Spitsbergen Treaty granted Norway sovereignty over Svalbard, however, it granted “the citizens of each party to the treaty ‘equal enjoyment’ and ‘equal liberty of access’ to the islands.”¹⁵ This left Svalbard under the authority of Norway but allowed dozens of states unrestricted access to the archipelago and its resources. This ambiguity in the law became apparent when former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dimitry Rogozin visited Svalbard in 2015. Norway had imposed a travel ban on Rogozin following his involvement in Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, making his presence undermine Norway’s assertion of control and authority over the archipelago.¹⁶

Understanding that Russia has a history of exploiting “gray areas, where the rules and norms are less defined,” Svalbard’s ambiguous international legal status makes it a potential target for Russian revisionism.¹⁷ Russian officials express contempt for the way the archipelago’s governance was determined, citing its exclusion from the 1920 treaty talks. Moreover, Moscow views the archipelago as part of its national identity, as an estimated 10–20% of Svalbard’s population are Russian citizens whose presence dates back to the 1500s.¹⁸ Given Russia’s interest in Svalbard’s rich oil reserves and fishing stocks,¹⁹ and recent annexation of Crimea, there is concern Russia could make a nationalistic appeal to exploit the archipelago’s ambiguous legal status and secure its interests on the islands.²⁰

Norway has made repeated attempts to consolidate its jurisdictional authority over Svalbard, including efforts to establish its own exclusive economic zone around the archipelago.²¹ European countries, including several NATO members, responded with intense objection.²² NATO members remain divided in their positions concerning Norway’s legal authority over the islands, and as a result, Svalbard could undermine NATO cohesion and become a source of division should Russia attempt to seize control.²³ Without a clear consensus and united Western front, Moscow could determine the risks of a NATO military response for reclaiming the archipelago are minimal.

NATO’s concerns include additional challenges. Russia has developed high-end maritime capabilities and increased its presence in the Arctic as part of a broader military strategy, outlined in Russia’s 2014 military doctrine and 2015 maritime doctrine.²⁴ Russia maintains two strategic goals in the North Atlantic and Arctic Region: “protect Russia’s nuclear deterrent forces in the Barents Sea” and “project power and fulfill Moscow’s global ambitions.”²⁵ To pursue these goals Russia has implemented an immense military modernization

program, which included creating or reopening 14 operational airfields and 16 deepwater ports in the Arctic, establishing an Arctic Command and two Arctic Brigades, and constructing newly refitted submarines for its Northern Fleet.²⁶ Russia's armed forces continue to conduct regular naval exercises and patrols in the Arctic, and expand their trans-regional radar systems and radio-electronic jamming capabilities.^{27, 28} Together, these investments and capabilities are essential to Russian Arctic dominance, increasing their capacity to control the region's maritime domain.

This build-up of military capabilities and infrastructure in the Arctic underscores the geostrategic importance of the region and its vast energy resources for Russian security and economic development. As Russia's naval nuclear capability is intended to "phase NATO out of [the] Arctic,"²⁹ the importance of a NATO security strategy for the Arctic is underscored. As it stands NATO has no formal role in the Arctic, though it did reaffirm its commitment to the region during the 2016 Warsaw Summit Communiqué:

*"In the North Atlantic, as elsewhere, the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lanes of communication and maritime approaches of NATO territory. We will further strengthen our maritime posture and comprehensive situational awareness."*³⁰

In line with this position, NATO reinstated naval patrols in the North Atlantic to deter Russian aggression, while NATO Arctic states invested in greater ground-based surveillance, early warning, and ballistic missile defense systems for the region.^{31, 32} Additionally, the United States responded by recommissioning its navy's Second Fleet to operate in the North Atlantic and Arctic, placing American forces in Iceland, and finalizing plans for the construction of new icebreakers.³³ These efforts on their own do little to resolve the challenge of preserving a stable, rules-based regional order in the face of Russian militarization. A comprehensive, overarching strategy is needed.

NATO's strategic approach to the Arctic must strike the right balance for the various members of the alliance, as they lack a crucial consensus on the scope and character of their involvement in Arctic regional security.³⁴ Notably, Canada would prefer that NATO maintain a minimal role in the Arctic, concerned that anything more would dilute the influence and authority of Arctic states over regional security issues and "would afford non-Arctic NATO countries influence in an area where they otherwise would have none."³⁵ This is misguided, as Denmark, Norway, the United States, and Canada itself have failed to counter Russian militarization or promote international norms and rules on their own. Norway would prefer that NATO take a significantly larger role in the region, as the country perceives Russia as a major threat and

the Arctic to be a critical vulnerability in NATO's defenses. For Norway, the Russian annexation of Crimea was a wake-up call, and as a result, it initiated its own military modernization program with the acquisition of submarines and fighter jets, and recommissioning of military bases.³⁶ Norway also hosted 2018's Exercise Trident Juncture, NATO's largest military exercise since 2002.³⁷ Norway understands that the alliance wields significant institutional power and authority capable of addressing a challenge of this scope and scale.

Finally, it is important to note that there are no multilateral forums or institutions dedicated to addressing hard security issues in the Arctic region. Both the Arctic Council's and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council's organizational purviews intentionally exclude military matters, while NATO primarily keeps out of Arctic matters in consideration of its Arctic member states.³⁸ Therefore, efforts to strengthen NATO's role in the Arctic must address this critical security gap. Otherwise, NATO risks triggering a regional security dilemma. The build-up of security forces and bilateral tension between two or more actors in the international system as a response to perceived aggression or growing insecurity may generate a security dilemma that could devolve into mutual hostility and conflict. Neither NATO nor Russia want conflict in the Arctic. Consequently, bridging the dialogue gap would serve to reduce misperception, build trust, and demonstrate peaceful intentions.

COURSE OF ACTION

As stated in the 2017 Political Committee Report on NATO and Security in the Arctic, "the Arctic is once again of profound importance to NATO security."³⁹ Despite this acknowledgement, NATO currently lacks an Arctic regional security strategy. This article aligns three strategic courses of action to address the changing Arctic security landscape, providing regional stability while reinforcing governance norms.

1. Maintain "a credible, Arctic-capable, amphibious force in Norway" to deter Russian revisionist intentions in Svalbard.⁴⁰

2. Utilize the NATO-Russia Council to "close the Arctic security dialogue gap through the creation of an Arctic security working group."⁴¹

3. Review NATO's maritime force posture and capabilities in the North Atlantic to ensure that NATO's collective defense remains credible.⁴²

In lieu of alliance cohesion surrounding Svalbard's legal authority, maintaining "a credible, Arctic-capable, amphibious force in Norway" is vital to deterring Russian revisionist intentions in the archipelago.⁴³ To be certain, NATO does not need to "gain parity in Arctic capability" with Russia to demonstrate its resolve and commitment to defending Svalbard, a commitment NATO has upheld since its incorporation into the NATO defense area in 1951.^{44, 45} Rather, a credible military force capable of responding quickly and

effectively to Russian incursions would be enough to change Moscow's calculus. Supporting Norway's military forces in the Arctic is an effective measure, considering they are best equipped and more active compared to other NATO Arctic states.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Norwegian joint headquarters are located within the Arctic Circle, and Norway's 'Marine Rotational Force – Europe' (MRF-E) maintains significant amphibious operational capability. NATO could augment the MRF-E by providing amphibious shipping and aviation platforms to strengthen MRF-E deterrent credibility.⁴⁷ With the requisite equipment, training, and specialized units for military operations under severe conditions, Norway has NATO's most-Arctic capable forces.

For this course of action to be effective, NATO must address its internal differences with regard to Norway's legal authority over Svalbard. Otherwise, NATO risks its northern flank remaining a critical vulnerability, providing Russia an opportunity to recreate its strategy of annexation through the exploitation of legal ambiguities to cast doubt whether international rules were broken to undermine NATO cohesion. In the event of a Russian attack on Svalbard, NATO requires unanimous consensus to invoke Article 5's collective defense obligations. Up to this point, Russia has complied with the UNCLOS, and "if the Alliance can take the lead on a resolution to that issue and provide a unified diplomatic position... a potential seam [within NATO] would be mended and a significant conflict driver removed."⁴⁸ This would also provide legal certainty to the 200 nautical mile zone surrounding Svalbard, encouraging greater economic investment and resource exploration.

Employing the NATO-Russia Council to "close the Arctic security dialogue gap through the creation of an Arctic security working group"⁴⁹ can promote transparency and risk reduction in the Arctic. Historically, the NATO-Russia Council has served as an important forum for "consultation and joint action between NATO members and Russia," and its applicability to the growing security challenge of Arctic stability and security is self-evident.⁵⁰ Avoiding a security dilemma in the Arctic is crucial to upholding regional stability and peaceful cooperative governance. As such, it will be imperative that NATO communicate its intentions and plans to Russia to reduce possible misperceptions and miscalculations, similar to how NATO uses the forum for issues pertaining to the European continent. It should be noted, however, that this course of action does risk diluting the influence and authority of NATO Arctic states over security matters in the Arctic, as it would give non-Arctic NATO members a voice and role in the governance of the region.

Utilizing the NATO-Russia Council in this manner would also respect the merit of the Arctic Council and empower it to continue to serve as an important policymaking forum for non-military security issues in the Arctic. Not only would this resolve the existing security dialogue gap in the Arctic, but it would ensure that Russia, the largest Arctic state, had a seat at the table. Any

security dialogue efforts excluding Russia would be ineffective at mitigating regional tensions and alleviating Russian insecurity. Due to the fact that the NATO-Russia Council is an already established and recognizable forum to Russia, it could be more effective than temporary or informal arrangements which do not have the necessary structure, mandate, resources, or time to address regional security challenges.⁵¹ Finally, this would strengthen NATO as a norms-building institution and demonstrate non-military intent to Russia. The rapid transformations in the Arctic are upending decades of political stability in the region. If NATO could install its institutional values and founding principles as Arctic norms it could serve a vital role in stabilizing the region.⁵² This would prevent Russia from controlling freedom of navigation in the Arctic, and assuage Russian concerns regarding NATO involvement in the North Atlantic and Arctic.

Reviewing NATO's maritime force posture and capabilities in the North Atlantic is critical to ensuring the 'credibility of NATO's collective defense capability.' Moscow's military modernization and expansion efforts over the past decade demonstrate Russia's capacity to "challenge NATO's control of the high seas...[and] disrupt critical allied sea lines of communication."⁵³ If the United States and NATO wish to continue their freedom of navigation and safeguard trans-Atlantic lines of communication and telecommunications cable networks, then NATO must be equipped to do so. The North Atlantic served as a top strategic priority for NATO during the Cold War. Considering the changing risk landscape, NATO should restore the attention and emphasis it placed on the region during that period as part of its contemporary, 360-degree approach. Otherwise, NATO risks critical vulnerabilities in the face of a more aggressive Russia. However, with the Arctic increasingly a domain for power competition, this course of action risks tensions expanding.⁵⁴ NATO should proceed cautiously with deployments in the North Atlantic and use the NATO-Russia Council to communicate its purpose and intent in the region.

CONCLUSION

NATO can play a leading role in preserving stability and establishing international rules and norms in the face of growing Russian militarization through implementing these three courses of action. The Arctic lacks central, comprehensive governance and norm-setting authority to manage its regional transformation and the subsequent geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences.⁵⁵ NATO's foundational principles, strategic mission, multilateral authority, and defense and deterrence capabilities make clear that it remains the most effective mechanism to counter Russian militarization in the Arctic and preserve rules-based order. Given Russia's commitment to maintaining its military advantage and infrastructural lead in the Arctic, NATO must ensure

that: delimitation disputes in the newly accessible regions of the Arctic are still peacefully resolved through legal means; Svalbard will not become the epicenter of a Crimea-style Russian attack; Russian insecurity and distrust of NATO do not engender an Arctic security dilemma; and that NATO's defense and deterrence credibility in the North Atlantic remains robust.⁵⁶ Any NATO involvement in the Arctic beyond these measures risks destabilization through further militarization in the region. As the Arctic continues its environmental transformation, geopolitical and geoeconomic competitions will continue to grow. Therefore, it is imperative that NATO work to prevent Russia from achieving Arctic military dominance while building the international legal framework capable of maintaining regional peace and stability.

ENDNOTES

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